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Abstract

The labor force and employment conditions in agriculture differ considerably from those in food manufacturing. Furthermore, unionization in agriculture is at an embryonic stage, while in food manufacturing it is well established. Because of these dissimilarities prospects for union growth are not the same and the two industries are treated separately below.

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Strategies for Union Growth In Food Manufacturing and Agriculture

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The labor force and employment conditions in agriculture differ considerably from those in food manufacturing. Furthermore, unionization in agriculture is at an embryonic stage, while in food manufacturing it is well established. Because of these dissimilarities prospects for union growth are not the same and the two industries are treated separately below.

Agriculture[1]

Until recent years meaningful union activity among agricultural workers was virtually nonexistent in spite of numerous organizing drives sponsored by established trade unions. Barriers inhibiting union organizing in agriculture include the extreme poverty of the workers, the lack of job securty, and the migrant nature of the work force. Compounding these problems, agriculatural workers are not protected by federal labor laws.

The United Farm Workers of America (UFWA), the outgrowth of a community organization started by California farmworkers in the early 1960's, has proved to be a proficient organizer of agricultural labor. The potential for union growth in agriculture rests with the UFWA. A look at the reasons for the UFWA's success provides a set of guidelines for further organizing among agricultural workers. Based on recent experience it is reasonable to assume that the Teamsters, the only other union active in agriculture, also benefit from UFWA organizing activity.

UFWA Strategies and Alliances

The UFWA signed its first contract in 1966 and expanded steadily until the spring of 1973, when 42 thousand agricultural workers in three states and a variety of crops were covered by UFWA contracts. Sixty thousand additional workers have signed union authorization cards but the UFWA has not yet been officially recognized as their bargaining agent.

[1] The following discussion of union activity in agriculture is based in part on Richard Hurd, "Organizing the Working Poor—the California Grape Strike Experience," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, forthcoming.

The UFWA's organizing success among low income agricultural workers derives from its dual status as both a union and a community organization. Rather than being concerned solely with work-related problems, the UFWA concentrates on satisfying all of the needs of its members. The union performs service work, assisting members with welfare and food stamp applications, social security and income tax forms, legal problems, and difficulties encountered with landlords and creditors. In addition the union operates several health clinics, a credit union, a cooperative store, a cooperative service station, and a child care center, and provides low cost medical and life insurance. Because agricultural workers are members of the poverty class, involvement in the satisfaction of non-work-related needs is mandatory if a union of these workers is to be viable.

The UFWA's union activity has also demonstrated a primary concern with the needs of the workers. Its insistence on limitations of pesticide use because of workers' health delayed settlement of the widely publicized table grape strike for a full year until growers finally agreed to far-reaching pesticide restrictions. Another important provision of all UFWA contracts is the union hiring hall. This is especially important because it undermines the labor contractor system through which agricultural workers have traditionally been employed. Under this system the grower arranges for a labor contractor to supply the required workers. The contractor hires the workers and possesses an all-pervasive control over them, frequently providing transportation, housing, and food for migrants, then subtracting inflated costs for these services from the workers' paychecks. By requiring a union hiring hall the UFWA has been able to eliminate this system and insure fair and equitable treatment for all workers.

By combining community and union organizing, the UFWA has been able to both achieve grass roots participation and attack the cause of the workers' poverty. However, because of the poverty of the workers and the resulting economic weakness of the union, support from outside sources was a prerequisite for the UFWA's success. An important tactical decision was to rely on consumer boycotts as a means to gain economic power. To assure the success of the boycotts, a number of important allies have been cultivated. As a union, employing union tactics and allying itself with established union organizations (most notably the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO] and the United Automobile Workers [UAW]), the UFWA has secured the cooperation of unionized working class people nationwide. The UFWA's reliance on the methods of the civil rights movement, its association with left leaning members

of Congress, and its image as a champion of the poor have led political liberals to participate in boycott activity. The UFWA has also emphasized its role as a Chicano union, aligning itself with other minority group organizations and receiving support from minority group members.

The Teamster Incursion

In the summer of 1970, as the table grape strike and boycott drew successfully to a close, the UFWA launched an organizing campaign among California's lettuce workers. Shortly after the campaign began, most of the lettuce growers announced that they had signed contracts with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Then in the spring and summer of 1973 when the UFWA's three year table grape contracts expired, the IBT signed with a majority of the grape growers. These two sets of contracts represent the extent of IBT involvement in agriculture.

The IBT did not win these contracts by organizing the workers, who by all indications favor the UFWA, but by "organizing" the growers. In fact, the IBT's willingness to sign contracts covering agricultural workers was welcomed, if not encouraged, by the growers who faced the alternative of recognizing the UFWA as bargaining agent. Although wages and benefits are approximately the same under the contracts signed by the two unions, there are two important differences in the agreements. The IBT contracts do not contain the extensive pesticide restrictions included in the UFWA contracts, nor do they call for union hiring halls. To the UFWA, with their commitment to the subordination of production to the needs of the workers, these two provisions are the most important clauses in their contracts. To the growers, these provisions are unacceptable because they hinder their ability to control production.[2] The growers clearly prefer the cooperative IBT over the antagonistic UFWA.

In the fall of 1973, with George Meany serving as a mediator, the UFWA and IBT reached a tentative jurisdictional agreement which would have brought an end to IBT union activity in agriculture. However, the IBT recently announced that they would not honor the agreement.[3]

Potential for Growth

With over two million agriculture industry employees who do not

[2] For a more detailed discussion of the importance of control over the production process see Andre Gorz, *Strategy for Labor* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

[3] "Meany Details Record of Teamster Farm Raid," *AFL-CIO News*, XVIII (December 1, 1973), p. 1.

belong to unions,[4] the UFWA and IBT have barely scratched the surface. The most promising approach for organizing low income agricultural workers is the UFWA's combination of community and union organizing. UFWA organizers are currently active all over California and in Arizona, Oregon, and Washington. Support is so widespread that UFWA officials have forewarned that a general strike in California agriculture is possible for next summer. Because community organizing is most effective where there are workers in year around residence, the greatest potential for UFWA type organizing east of the Rockies lies in Texas and Florida, the originating points for the Midwestern and Eastern migrant streams respectively.

Unless they shift from their "organize the growers" approach, the IBT's opportunity for expanding membership in agriculture lies with the UFWA. Where the UFWA has successfully organized the workers, most growers will turn to the IBT as a lesser evil.

The IBT's incursion into agriculture is unfortunate. Their presence will undoubtedly slow down union growth, since much of the UFWA's time and energy will necessarily be spent trying to regain contracts lost to the IBT. However, there is no indication at this time that the IBT will break the UFWA, especially with the extensive financial support being provided the UFWA by the AFL-CIO.

In recent years there has been substantial support in Congress for an amendment to Taft-Hartley extending its coverage to include agricultural workers, and there is a good possibility that such an amendment will be approved within the next few years. Coverage under Taft-Hartley, with agricultural workers' rights to choose a bargaining representative thus protected, would no doubt lead to an expansion of UFWA membership, in some cases at the expense of the IBT. However, the Taft-Hartley prohibition of secondary boycotts would inhibit the UFWA's economic power, and the prohibition of union hiring halls would limit the UFWA's contract demands.

Due to steady advances in mechanization, agricultural employment declined almost 40 percent from 1960 to 1970.[5] Employment reductions are expected to continue, which will eat into union membership in areas where workers are already organized. At the same time, however, mechanization will increase the potential for unionization among the workers who remain because they will be more highly skilled and less transient.

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[4] U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Nineteenth Decennial Census of the United States: 1970. Population*, I, p. 798.

[5] *loc. cit.*

Food Manufacturing

Food manufacturing is made up of several distinct industries (meat packing, baking, breakfast cereal, etc.), with market conditions and the extent of unionization varying considerably from one industry to the next. To further complicate the picture, 25 different unions represent food manufacturing employees.[6] In spite of the diversity some general observations can be made concerning the potential for union growth.

Food manufacturing is one of the more highly organized industrial sectors, with approximately two-thirds of production workers unionized.[7] The one food industry with considerable promise for union expansion is fruit and vegetable processing, which is for the most part unorganized except on the West Coast. Employees of food processing plants face some of the same conditions as agricultural workers, namely low wages and seasonal work. Because of these similarities food industry unions active among processing plant workers should consider adopting the UFWA model, combining union and community organizing.

Another relatively unorganized group of workers consists of southern food manufacturing employees. The organizing problems which arise in the south are well known and affect virtually all industries. Most food industry unions have used traditional organizing techniques in the south, stressing the improvements in wages and benefits which unions deliver, with little success. A notable exception is the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), which represents the primarily black work force in several Alabama food processing plants. RWDSU involvement in the civil rights movement in Alabama laid the groundwork for this organizing accomplishment. Following the RWDSU example, other food industry unions should consider going beyond typical organizing and should concern themselves with the particular needs and problems of southern workers, black and white, in order to erase their fear of unions and their distrust of "yankee" union organizers.

Impact of Mechanization on Union Growth

The most important problem facing unions in food manufacturing is mechanization. From 1960 to 1970 employment declined almost

[6] U.S., Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations 1971,* Bulletin No. 1750, 1972, p. 80. The unions with more than ten thousand members in food manufacturing are the Bakery and Confectionery Workers, the Distillery Workers, the Grain Millers, the Meat Cutters, the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union, and the Teamsters.

[7] *ibid.,* p. 81

25 percent in the food industry compared to a seven percent employment *increase* in manufacturing as a whole.[8] This employment decline is expected to continue. In spite of losses due to mechanization major food industry unions have been able to maintain fairly stable membership levels through actively organizing the unorganized.

The prevailing attitude of union leaders is to accept mechanization in the food industry as a fact of life. They have responded with an attempt to soften the impact of mechanization on individual union members by bargaining for increased separation pay, early retirement, shorter work weeks, and in some cases retraining programs and transfer rights. This approach is aimed at forcing food manufacturing firms to bear the social costs of mechanization (namely the unemployment which results) and is understandable in the framework of orthodox economics.

The non-resistance of unions to mechanization derives from the prevalent attitude that mechanization is the natural result of technological change and is merely a reflection of the efficiency orientation of business. This narrow view has clouded the total picture, for behind these efficiency incentives lie power incentives. Union leaders and economists need to look beyond efficiency and consider the impact of mechanization on the social relations in production.[9]

Mechanization clearly weakens workers (and unions) vis-a-vis capital (and management). As Baumgartner and Burns observe, "While management is in a position . . . to create an alternative to labor in the form of machinery, . . . labor is generally unable to establish an alternative to the means of production controlled by management. This inequality in options assures employers dominant power over labor."[10] The most important part of the social relations between management and unions is control over the production process. Mechanization increases management's control.

With rapid mechanization the work rules negotiated by unions are eliminated. Unions are forced to concentrate their efforts on reducing the negative effects of technological change on employment. As a result it is not until mechanization stabilizes and unions are able to adjust to new job descriptions and work assignments that attention is again focused on establishing work rules in order to adapt production to the needs of the workers.

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[8] U.S., Bureau of the Census, *op. cit.*

[9] For a discussion of the historical evolution of the social relations of production see Stephen Marglin, "What Do Bosses Do?" (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, August 1971). (Mimeographed.)

[10] Tom Baumgartner and Tom Burns, "Employer/Employee Power Relations, Capitalist Institutions, and Wage Levels" (Durham, N.H.: University of New Hampshire, Novmeber, 1973), p. 11. (Mimeographed.)

Typically food industry unions have conceded to management the right to make decisions regarding mechanization, trading control over production and employment for higher wages. As a result workers sacrifice what little influence they have over their jobs. Furthermore the relative power position of unions is worsened as management authority increases. If food manufacturing unions are to increase their membership and expand their power, they must develop a more aggressive strategy. This is not to say that unions should attempt to halt technological change. Rather, mechanization should be more carefully planned and, because they are profoundly affected, workers should participate in the decision-making process.

It is obvious that management will not grant workers an equal (or even subordinate) voice in mechanization decisions, for by making such a concession they would sacrifice their dominant position in the socal relations of production. Currently, unions in food manufacturing (with the possible exception of the Teamsters) do not have the necessary power to force such a change, and thus must find ways to improve their position. As a first step they should fight for restrictive work rules in order to regain parity in the power relationship with management. Furthermore, these unions should consider merging, or should at least establish formal cooperation.

Potential Advantages of Union Mergers

During the 1960's most of the organizing efforts of food manufacturing unions were wasted on raiding and jurisdictional disputes. Three recent horizontal mergers in meat packing (Meat Cutters and Packinghouse Workers), baking (Bakery and Confectionery Workers, and American Bakery and Confectionery Workers), and brewing (Brewery Workers and Teamsters) have eliminated most of the needless and divisive competition among food manufacturing unions. This should result in more effective organizing of the unorganized since resources have been pooled and competition has been replaced by cooperation. Future horizontal mergers would have a similar impact.[11]

As important as horizontal mergers are, however, vertical mergers (from the farm to the retail store) would contribute more to union power. With vertical integration, coordination of union activities at different stages of food production and distribution would be facilitated, and unions could make para-legal use of secondary strikes and

[11] Jerry Wurf, vice-president of the AFL-CIO, is a strong proponent of mergers because of the organizing gains which would result. Jerry Wurf, "Labor's Battle With Itself," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1973, p. C1.

secondary boycotts.[12] These weapons would greatly augment the arsenal of food manufacturing unions and would make the erection of restrictive work rules and the acquisition of a voice in mechanization decisions attainable objectives.

Most unions in the food sector support the principle of mergers. However, further mergers among major food industry unions are unlikely in the near future because of political differences between unions and because union leaders seem unwilling to sacrifice their own power and prestige even in the interest of a stronger trade union movement.

Because merger prospects are not especially bright, attention should be focused on the formation of closer alliances. Mutual aid pacts, coordinated bargaining, joint organizing campaigns, and no raid agreements would promote organizing of the unorganized and would reenforce the power of individual unions vis-a-vis management. The Meat Cutters and Teamsters have long worked in such a cooperative way, and both have benefited. Other food manufacturing unions should set petty differences aside and follow their example.

[12] The Teamsters have successfully used such leverage techniques for years. For a detailed discussion of the bargaining power thus created, see Estelle James and Ralph James, "Hoffa's Leverage Techniques in Bargaining," *Industrial Relations* III (October, 1963), pp. 73–93.